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First Things First

This week, Life Training Online is reviewing [First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy](#), by Steven Covey, the twelfth of fifty-two books in the [52 Personal Development Books in 52 Weeks](#) series.

This week we'll be taking a look at another one of Stephen Covey's classics.

First Things First was written after Covey's previous blockbuster, [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). If you've read that book, you may notice that the title of this book is one of the 7 Habits (habit number 3 to be exact), the habit of effective time management.

If you struggle with having too much to do and not enough time to do it, or find that you can't seem to find a balance between your personal life and work, or even if deep in the inner recesses of your being you feel empty, Covey explains that perhaps it's because you're not putting first things first in your life.

Hoping to break out of the mold of previous time-management thinking with its prescriptions of faster, harder, smarter, and more, Covey introduces the concept of a compass — implying that the direction your heading is more important than how fast you're going.

Will this book stand along side his 7 Habits, or is it simply an attempt of the author to cash in on his new-found success? Let's find out this week...

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First Things First: Chapters 1 - 5

This week, Life Training Online is reviewing [First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy](#), by Steven Covey, the twelfth of fifty-two books in the [52 Personal Development Books in 52 Weeks](#) series.

I apologize for the delay on this post. It's quite extensive, but I felt it needed to be in order to give his book the due diligence it deserves. Enjoy...

Chapter 1: How Many People On Their Deathbed Wish They Spent More Time In the Office?

The problem with busy people is not that they lack getting things done. It's just that they're not getting the most important things done. Covey explains that the issue for those who produce a lot of output does not lie between the "good" and the "bad" but between the "good" and the "best."

I find myself struggling with this very same thing. I spend far too much time letting the "good" things in my life get in the way of the "best" things. And this is where this book promises to help us — to help us learn to put first things first in our lives.

The Clock and the Compass

To help strengthen our understanding, Covey brings into play the analogy of the clock and the compass — two powerful tools that direct us. The clock represents things like our schedule, commitments, appointments, goals, activities — basically what we do with and how we manage our time. The compass on the other hand represents the visions and priorities we have, the principles we follow, and the direction we feel we should go. This tool dictates how we lead our lives.

The frustration happens when you notice a gap between the two — basically when what you do doesn't contribute to what is most important in your life. With all the pressure to close this gap, many of us turn to our traditional time-management tools/methods. However, according to Covey, these tools leave much to be desired

and a [new generation time-management tool is required](#).

Chapter 2: The Urgency Addiction

The two driving forces that influence how we use our time are *urgency* and *importance*. One of these however, is the central paradigm that we tend to follow.

For example, think about how often urgency influences your decisions. The phone rings. Your boss swings by the desk wanting some memo. Someone IMs you, etc.

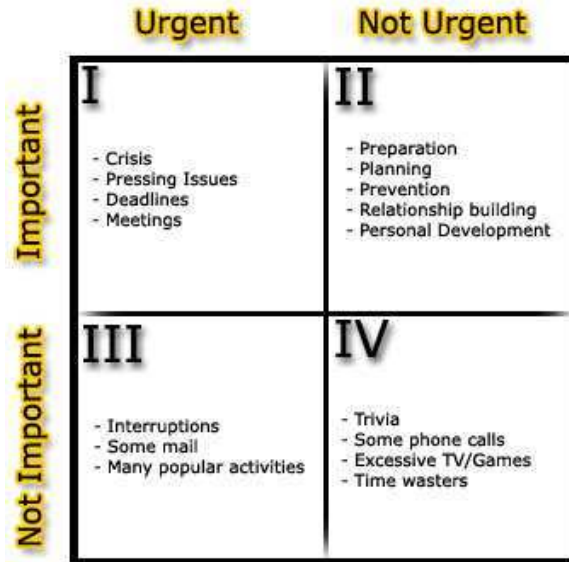
Urgency has enough power to become an addiction if you let it. In fact, some of us get quite good at putting out all these little fires that pop up in our lives that we begin to thrive on them. Sure they put stress in our lives, but they also give us excitement, leave us with a feeling of accomplishment and success, and by golly we get good at it. In my college years I used to pride myself in not studying the whole semester and then cramming like crazy to ace the final and yes, I got real good at it.

Urgency in its own right is not the problem. The problem is when urgency, not importance, becomes the *dominant factor* in our lives and the important things get left by the wayside.

To more effectively deal with the issues of urgency and importance, take a look at Covey's Time Management Matrix below. We spend our time in one of these four ways:

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Quadrant I activities are those that are both urgent *and* important. These are those “fires” that need to be put out. Although we all need to spend some time in this quadrant, it’s when we spend too much time here that we risk stress issues and burnout. By learning to focus your time on Quadrant II activities — important things that are not urgent — you’ll be spending less time in Quadrant I.

Activities that are in Quadrant III can easily be mistaken for Quadrant I activities. But these activities — if they are important at all — are only important to someone else and should be avoided.

Quadrant IV is the quadrant of waste. We shouldn’t be spending any time here at all. Covey explains that these aren’t necessarily recreational things, because recreation is an essential Quadrant II activity. Examples of these activities include habitually watching “mindless” television shows or gossiping.

Chapter 3: To Live, to Love, to Learn to Leave a Legacy

After moving from an urgency paradigm to one of importance, you may have wondered what exactly these “first things” are and how can you put them first in your life? Covey describes in this chapter three fundamental ideas which allow us to answer this question:

1. **The fulfillment of the four human needs and capacities:**

The four needs that Covey is referring to here are represented by the

title of this chapter, “to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy.” The need to live equates to our physical needs such as food, clothing, shelter, economic well-being and so on. The need to love is our social need to interact with others. The need to learn represents our mental need to continually develop and grow. And finally, the need to leave a legacy is our spiritual need for meaning, purpose, and contribution.

Each one of these needs is essential to quality of life. When one or more are lacking in our lives they effect all the others.

2. **The reality of “true north” principles:**

Although it’s important to fulfill these four needs in our lives, equally important is *how* we fulfill them. Unless we value principles, values will *not* bring quality of life results. And “true north” principles, according to Covey, are the universal and timeless truths that can be found throughout all the wisdom literature of the ages. When you align with those principles, and bring each of your needs in balance with all the others, you’ll experience true fulfillment in life.

3. **The potentiality of the four human endowments:**

Human beings have four “endowments” which separate us from the animal world. These are: self-awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination.

Self-awareness is “our capacity to stand apart from ourselves and examine our thinking, our motives, our history, our scripts, our actions, and our habits and tendencies.” Conscience is what connects us to true principles and is our internal guidance system. Independent will is what allows us to act, to choose our response instead of re-acting. And finally creative imagination is our ability to envision a future state, to create something in our mind, and visualize our potential.

Chapter 4: Quadrant II Organizing – The Process of Putting First Things First

Here’s where Covey gets into the nitty-gritty of his planning method. If you’re familiar with the Franklin Covey planners, these principles form the basis of them. There are essentially six steps to planning which should be done on a weekly basis:

1. **Connect With Your Vision and Mission**

Your mission represents those things that are most important in your life.

The things that give your life meaning and ultimately determine what you want to do and who you want to become.

2. **Identify Your Roles**

Roles represent the many different hats that you wear in life. A parent, a manager, a husband/wife, a church member, a community volunteer etc. Covey recommends choosing at most seven roles and selecting those which work together to contribute to the fulfillment of your mission.

3. **Select Quadrant II Goals in Each Role**

Now that you've identified your main roles, ask yourself: *"What is the most important thing I could do in each role this week to have the greatest positive impact?"*

4. **Create a Decision-Making Framework for the Week**

This is where you make sure that those "important" actions are included in your week and is the foundation of putting "first things first."

5. **Exercise Integrity in the Moment of Choice**

This is where you implement your framework from the previous step. It's acting daily on what's important and living your plan. If there must be changes, then those changes come only when conscious directs you to do so.

6. **Evaluate**

Here's where we come full circle. At the end of the week, take out your planner and look back on what you've accomplished and where improvements can be made — applying those improvements to the planning of the next week.

Chapter 5: The Passion of Vision

In chapter 5, Covey delves deeply into the importance of creating and living an empowering mission statement. I love the analogy he gives. Basically, if we aren't living a mission that is based on true principles and values, then we might be "climbing the ladder of success only to find that it's leaning against the wrong wall."

An effective and empowering mission statement should be one which transforms you and is based on principles of contribution and purpose that are higher than self. It should address and integrate all four fundamental human needs and capacities. It should be based on principles that produce quality of life. It should integrate seamlessly with all the significant roles you fill in life. And finally, it should inspire you.

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First Things First: Chapters 6 - 10

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Chapter 6: The Balance of Roles

As they work through their mission statements, many people awaken to the fact that they have been neglecting many important areas of their lives. They invest extensive time and energy into one area — such as their job, hobbies, or community service — all the while forgetting vital areas such as their health, family, or friends. Still others, aware of the various roles in their lives, feel they just can't find enough time to equally balance them out. This inability to balance their many roles in life doesn't stem from a lack of time, but instead is a result of a lack of understanding of what "role balancing" really means.

According to Covey, we are programmed at an early to view our roles as separate "compartments" of life. We attend different classes, have separate textbooks and when we get an A in Biology and a C in History we fail to notice the relationship between the two. In a similar vein we see our role at work as being completely separate from our role at home and definitely miss the boat when we try to find their relationship to our roles in personal development or community service.

Instead of viewing these roles as "either/or" — where we have to constantly run back and forth between our various "compartments" — we should take a more holistic viewpoint — allowing the roles to work synergistically in one related whole.

Take for example two of my roles — "personal development" and "husband". If this week my goal in the "personal development" role is to exercise, and my goal in my "husband" role is to spend some quality time with my wife, I could combine the two and, say, go play tennis with my wife. By transcending the "either/or" mentality of choosing one role over another — thus creating a win-lose scenario (one role is worked on while another is neglected) — and instead seek to combine roles synergistically, you save tremendous amounts of time and create win/win

opportunities.

Chapter 7: The Power of Goals

Setting and achieving goals is a common thread that runs throughout self-help literature. However, most of these “traditional” goal-setting methods incorporate only two of the four human endowments available to us: *creative imagination* and *independent will*.

We use our *creative imagination* to visualize ourselves beyond our present state and see ourselves achieving what it is that we desire. We use our *independent will* to carry out our plans of action and make the correct choices which lead us to accomplishing our goals. These two endowments are very powerful in their own right, but we are using only a small part of what’s available to us. Here are two other endowments which we can call upon:

▸ **Conscience**

▸ **Self-awareness**

Conscience is what aligns our goals to our mission, needs and principles. Using our conscience to direct our goal setting helps us to answer three vital questions: What do we want? Why do we want it? and How will we achieve it? Led by conscience, we are doing the right thing for the right reason in the right way.

Self-awareness is the ear to the voice of conscience. It’s what allows us to make an accurate assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, thereby helping us to make realistic goals. We see where we really are in life — no illusions and no excuses. At the same time we recognize our need to stretch, not allowing us to cop out on the path of mediocrity.

Remember, using creative imagination and independent will in goal setting isn’t enough to create quality of life. Hitler used them to set and achieve goals. So did Ghandi. But Ghandi was also directed by conscience and self-awareness.

Covey recommends as you set goals to keep in mind these **five characteristics of effective weekly goals**:

1. **They’re driven by conscience.**

Effective goals are in harmony with our deepest selves. It’s something we feel, deep inside, that we need to do, and is in harmony with our

mission and true principles.

2. **They're often Quadrant II goals.**

By choosing Quadrant II goals, we are focusing on what's important — not urgent — in our lives. Something too many of us often neglect.

3. **They reflect our four basic needs and capacities.**

Most of us pursue goals that are time-bound and tangible. This leads to imbalance and severely limits our quality of life. Effective goals are not only about what we want to have in the physical dimension, but should also include spiritual, social, and mental components as well.

4. **They're in the Center of Focus.**

Each of us has a what Covey calls a Circle of Concern. This encompasses everything that we're concerned about — the President's foreign policy decisions, the graffiti on the walls of our neighborhood, our health, or the rising taxes.

Within this circle is another circle called the Circle of Influence. This defines the area of concern where we can actually make a difference. We may not be able to influence the President's foreign policy decisions but we can do something about the graffiti in our neighborhood and we can definitely do something about our health.

But the most effective use of our time and energy is found in the Center of Focus — which is at the center of both the Circle of Concern and the Circle of Influence. This includes all the things we're concerned about, which are within our ability to influence, and most importantly are aligned with our mission.

Trying to operate in the Circle of Concern, we waste time and effort on things that we have no ability to change or affect. When we work within the Circle of Influence, we are able to do some good, but we may be doing it at the expense of something better. By setting goals within our Center of Focus, we maximize the use of our time and effort.

5. **They're either determinations or concentrations.**

Finally, it helps to define your goals in terms of *determinations* — things you're absolutely committed to do, no matter what — and *concentrations*, things you would like to focus your efforts around.

With determinations, your integrity is on the line. Unless directed by conscience, you commit to following through. By fulfilling these determinations, you make major deposits into your own personal [Emotional Bank Account](#).

Concentrations on the other hand, do not risk your integrity. These are things you are focusing on and desire to move toward. If you don't do them, you may lose the invested time and energy, but you don't make withdrawals from your own [Emotional Bank Account](#)

Chapter 8: The Perspective of the Week

Covey starts this chapter off with an analogy of the different lenses professional photographers use and how they relate to our planning — a wide-angle lens for the big picture, a normal lens to capture what we normally see with our eyes, and the micro lens for close-up work.

Most time-management methods focus on daily planning — the use of the micro lens. It seems like a pretty solid form of planning because with the rise and fall of the sun, we have a perfect unit of time to go by. But the problem with daily planning is that it leads to us prioritizing crisis. We're focusing and seeing only what's in front of us — the pressing, proximate, and urgent things.

Looking at just the big picture — the wide-angle lens — is not the ideal either. We can't have our heads constantly in the clouds never translating our vision into action. We lose touch with reality and eventually lose credibility with ourselves and others.

So, how can we resolve this issue and keep things in perspective and focus? We do this through weekly planning — the normal lens. The week represents "a complete path in the fabric of life." It is close enough to be relevant, but at the same time distant enough to provide perspective and context.

Covey suggests to set aside a time in the week — preferably in a place that's conducive to introspection and contemplation — and map out your plan for the coming week ahead. In our planning each week, we should include the following:

▀Balanced Renewal

Be sure to plan a time in the week for re-creation and renewal. In the Judeo-Christian world for example, they honor the Sabbath — one day out of the

seven devoted to reflection and recommitment. Also, dedicating 30 min out of every day for personal renewal through exercise or meditation will keep your saw sharp and your mind clear.

▀ **Synergy among our Goals**

This is where we look to find opportunities to balance our roles in achieving our goals (see Chapter 6). This creates synergy and we're better able to leverage the time we have.

▀ **Schedule you Priorities**

Covey makes the point that, unlike daily planning where you prioritize what's on the schedule, weekly planning involves scheduling your priorities. You don't fill every time slot with scheduled activity, but rather put the most important things down first, only then adding whatever else it is that we need to add.

Chapter 9: Integrity in the Moment of Choice

In this chapter, Covey instructs us on how to develop integrity in the moment of choice. Life doesn't always go according to our weekly plan. Sometimes things will come up which force us to reevaluate our plan and choose between equally good and important things. What do we do then?

That's where integrity in the moment of choice comes into play. Integrity is defined as soundness, wholeness or completeness. As we go about our daily lives, we build our integrity in our choices by learning and interacting with our conscience. This happens through a three-fold process:

1. **Ask with Intent:**

Here's where we essentially become principle centered. We basically ask our conscience to guide us in our decisions. Questions like, "Is this in my Center of Focus?" or "What's the best use of my time right now?" help us to clarify what the best choice for us to make in the moment really is.

2. **Listen without Excuse**

When we begin to feel the first whispering of conscience, we either follow it or try to rationalize why we should make some other choice. If we choose the second option, it will only lead to disharmony and tension. Only by acting in harmony with the voice of conscience, will we feel

peace and ultimately quality of life.

3. **Act with Courage**

Emerson said, "That which we persist in doing becomes easier to do, not that the nature of the thing has changed, but that our ability to do has increased." Asking our conscience for direction and listening without excuse takes courage. Fortunately, the more that we do it, the easier it becomes until we are living a principle-centered life.

People who live by and listen to conscience are not easily swayed by society's or the media's current. They're not addicted to the "cotton-candy" satisfaction of urgency addiction. They do, however, experience deep and lasting fulfillment in their lives — despite difficulties and challenges. People know deep down inside what it is that they should be doing. The challenge is to develop one's character and ear to listen and live by it. This is what Covey means by acting with integrity in the moment of choice.

Chapter 10: Learning from Living

The value of weekly planning and living is not just centralized around what we did in it; it's also found in what we have learned from it and most importantly what we become as a result of it.

Since the week is part of the greater whole, it helps to evaluate what we've done. It's interesting because as we plan for the upcoming week and act out our plan, evaluation is not only the last step of that plan but also the first. It's the first step in the cycle of evaluate -> organize -> and act. Covey says that "as we organize, act, evaluate...organize, act, evaluate...and organize, act, and evaluate again, our weeks become repeating cycles of learning and growth."

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First Things First: Chapters 11 - 15

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Chapter 11: The Interdependent Reality

If you think about it, everything that we identify as important in our lives has to do with others. Even seemingly independent things like "health" or "security" are sought after so that we can have more resources and time to spend with our families and friends. As Ghandi said we are social beings. Our greatest joy as well as our greatest pain comes from the relationships we have with others. It's no surprise then that quality of life is, by nature, *interdependent*.

Despite the reality of life being blatantly interdependent, we still tend to see success as something of an independent achievement. But a lot of effectiveness is wasted in the "I'll do it on my own" approach.

Functioning in an interdependent reality creates a powerful fulcrum where tremendous leverage can be found.

Chapter 12: First Things First Together

Much of our society seems scripted with a win/lose mentality. In order for us to "win", then someone else must need to "lose". We see this in athletics, academics, and on-the-job ranking systems. But contrary to what we might believe, "to win" doesn't necessarily imply somebody else has to lose; it means we accomplish our objectives. And when we cooperate with each other, so many more of these objectives can be accomplished. To illustrate this, Covey shares a great analogy:

Suppose one of us were to challenge you to an arm wrestle. The objective is to win as much as you can. The time limit is 60 seconds, and we have an

observer who has agreed to give the winner a dime whenever one of us gets the other one down. We're poised and ready for action.

Now suppose for the sake of the example, that we immediately get you down. But instead of keeping you there, we immediately release the pressure and let you get us down. We quickly respond and go for another down. Out of habit, you resist. You want to win...But in the midst of the struggle, it suddenly occurs to you that each of us now has a dime. If you were to give us another win, and we gave you another win...we'd both end up winning a whole lot more. So we work together, going back and forth, back and forth quickly — and in 60 seconds we each make three dollars instead of one of us settling for ten cents.

Adopting this mindset of win/win will create amazing results in your organizations like your work, family, scout troop — whatever organization you're involved in. It requires shared vision and synergizing the roles and goals of all involved. But it's well worth it.

Chapter 13: Empowerment from the Inside Out

Unfortunately we don't live in a perfect world. There is hardship, politicking, corruption, struggle and vicissitudes. This is part of life. However, when we begin to think that the problem is "out there," that thought in reality becomes the problem. By casting the blame on what's outside ourselves, we in effect give away our power. We empower the weaknesses and circumstances of other people to control us.

Principle-centered living allows us to empower ourselves. It's what helps us to focus our energy on our Circle of Influence. We don't point the finger or accuse, but instead see where we can use our influence to create the environment that we desire. Covey suggests three ways anyone can use their Circle of Influence to create change:

- 1. Cultivate the Conditions of Empowerment:**

Empowerment doesn't just simply happen. Effort is required to make it grow. If you want to create change in your environment of choice, you must cultivate conditions that create empowerment. This includes becoming trustworthy by being integrous and competent, looking for win-win agreements with all involved and having the ability to direct yourself — not having to be told to do every detail.

- 2. Seek Feedback:**

As you're building your character and competence, one of the highest-leverage activities you can do is to seek feedback. Seeking out feedback requires humility and courage, but the payout is well worth it. As you begin to improve upon those things that are pointed out to you, you create massive amounts of trust.

3. **Become a Leader/Servant:**

If you're in a formal leadership role (a parent for example) what should you be spending your time doing? Being a leader/servant means that you create shared vision. Instead of micro-managing, you strengthen, coach, and mentor to help develop the capacities of those under you. You build relationships of trust. In other words, you spend time doing important, non-urgent Quadrant II activities.

Chapter 14: From Time Management to Personal Leadership

What Covey is trying to teach in this book is that this system goes beyond mere time management. It's personal leadership. In this chapter, Covey shares some real-world examples to show how different personal-leadership is from standard time-management. I won't go into any details with his examples (you can check out the book if you'd like to read more) but basically it shows how powerful Quadrant II living in our daily lives can be.

Chapter 15: The Peace of the Results

Peace of mind — what Covey is referring to here — is one of the characteristics that develop when living a principled-centered, Quadrant II life and putting first things first. Here are some more characteristics that people will develop:

- ▶ They're more flexible and spontaneous
- ▶ They have richer, more rewarding relationships with other people
- ▶ They're more synergistic
- ▶ They're continually learning
- ▶ They become more contribution-focused
- ▶ They produce extraordinary results
- ▶ They develop a healthy psychological immune system
- ▶ They create their own limits
- ▶ They lead more balanced lives

- ▶ They become more confident and secure
- ▶ They're better able to walk their talk
- ▶ They focus on their Circle of Influence
- ▶ They cultivate a rich inner life
- ▶ They radiate positive energy
- ▶ They enjoy life more

Covey concludes with saying that as you develop the capacity to listen to conscience and plan and organize effectively to do first things first, you'll be able to make many contributions in your life — which is ultimately why we're here.

There is great peace that comes with principle-centered living. As Emerson said, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

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First Things First: Final Thoughts

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It was such a pleasure to read **First Things First** this week. I was really impressed with the scope and depth of Covey's knowledge and insight. Having read many self-help and personal development books in the past, I've always found Covey's work to be at the top of my most-recommended reading list. This one is no different. In fact, I've found it to be on equal ground with his [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). To say that I'm surprised is an understatement, because I hold the 7 Habits book to be one of greatest works in all the literature on personal development.

So do I recommend this book? Most definitely! If you're looking to go beyond the usual and often unoriginal time-management methods of today and enter the "fourth generation" of personal leadership, then buy this book.

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